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A Hungry Tea Guest's Reflections

Like most historians, I usually go to archives full of curiosity, hungry for information. What if this is where I find a clue – a document, letter, or image that has remained unknown to historians until my discovery of it? Or a handwritten note in the margins of an archival record that can lead to new insights? Yet, despite such expectations and the thrill when a discovery happens, archival work is full of loose if not dead ends. Historians rarely speak about it, but we all spend a lot of time going through catalogues, registers, and boxes of material only to find that there is nothing there to give us the answers we were initially looking for. This can lead to new questions and trajectories for our research. But it can also feel like a waste of both our own limited research time and the archive's resources. Well, I can easily get up and leave. But what happens when the archive in question is not a professional institution, but a fellow human being who has invited you to hear about their experiences or memories?

While working on mid-twentieth-century women landscape architects, I quickly realized I needed to search beyond institutional archives, which could only help me part of the way. So, like many other historians of subjects that have been undervalued in traditional archiving practices, I relied heavily on the generosity of private people, in this case often retired landscape architects or their children, sisters, nephews, partners, commissioners, students, and former employees. They kindly opened their doors to me and shared documents, drawings, photographs, and stories that had not previously made their way into the official architectural archives or history books.

One time, as I sat at a neatly laid table with a white tablecloth, amid the quiet of an apartment that received few visitors, listening to the ticking of an old clock – a sound that evoked in me a mixture of tranquility and stress – the situation felt like the complete opposite of my normal working life. The woman in front of me had served us coffee, tea, and cookies, and she had set aside the afternoon to share her archive. As the conversation went on, I soon realized that this visit would lead nowhere in terms of the woman landscape architects I was researching. A stream of email notifications and missed calls kept popping up on my smartphone: students were waiting, deadlines were looming. How could I reconcile the hectic pressures of my working life with respectfully listening to this woman who had invited me to visit? Getting up to leave seemed like a rude and wrong thing to do. This and other visits placed me on charged ethical territory, not only as a professional historian but also as a human being. I rely on the generosity of individuals to share their memories and privately stored materials: books, letters, photographs, scrib-

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bles, or even a written but never published memoir. Sometimes, when it turns out that the visit is not going to lead to any immediate "research results," I can blame myself for a misunderstanding prior to the meeting; sometimes, the information I thought I might glean was never there or has been forgotten. I might be wasting preciously funded research time, but I am also involved in an intimate encounter with a human being, someone who is sharing their memories and life histories – someone who is by no means a "dead end."

During such visits, I often find myself oscillating between multiple more or less problematic positions: being a good listener who looks with curiosity at everything my host wants to show me; feeling empathically connected to someone who has kindly invited me in and wants to share their lived experiences and knowledge, almost as if I were their daughter or granddaughter, but then remembering that we have only just met and I am there professionally; being a curious historian, hungry for new documents, pictures, information, insights and guiltily worried that my eagerness for information may be merely predatory. As I listen to the stories of hosts who are in their 80s or 90s, looking at their hands, sometimes having to ask my questions loudly because their hearing is declining, I wonder what my own life will look like at that age, if I should live so long. Here am I, with the power to select whose story gets to be told, with the authority given to me by university degrees and academic publishers and still as someone who cares and who actively listens to the life histories told. These visits and conversations create emotional relationships between my hosts and me, and yet they are not free of what oral historian and activist Sherna Berger Gluck calls the "power differential between interviewer and narrator."[1] Archival visits are anything but innocent. The setting may be a private home, the conversation is often intimate, and I always try to create a feeling of mutuality, but nonetheless there is a professional purpose behind it all. Historians Sanchia deSouza and Jyothsna Latha Belliappa remind us that in oral history interviewing, the "sense of privacy [. . .] is largely an illusion, given that the interview is intended in part or whole for an archive or for publication."[2]

Navigating these complicated situations, and all the ethical questions to which they give rise, has not traditionally been part of architectural history education, but they are inevitable as we widen and redirect the scope of architectural history. As

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[1] Sherna Berger Gluck, "Foreword," in *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (London: Routledge, 2018), 23.

[2] Sanchia deSouza and Jyothsna Latha Belliappa, "The Positionality of Narrators and Interviewers. Methodological comments on oral history with Anglo-Indian schoolteachers in Bangalore, India," in *Beyond Women's Words. Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (London: Routledge, 2018), 40.

I work on my research agenda, these visits are rare moments where finding – and also apparently not finding – anything of interest in the archive evokes a different sense of what it means to be connected to other human beings, and where contradictory emotions coexist and sometimes clash.


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Figure 2.3: Floral with background of quotes. Pattern inspired by “The Art of Layering” and “Woman, show me your garden”.